

# PHRA BUA AND NOVICE LEE-AM

by Ñ.B\*

THE WRITER FIRST HEARD about the novice who could recollect his former life, while at the cremation of Phra Acharn Mun Bhuridatta Thera, in February 1950.<sup>1</sup> Novice Lee-am from X Village was described together with the fact that he was due to come to the cremation ceremony. When the writer later met the novice, he talked with him and then asked about his recollection of a previous life. The novice didn't immediately answer. He said that every time he told anyone about it he invariably became ill with a fever, but because of his respect for the writer he would explain. This is what he said:

“In my previous life, I was born in Koke-la Village, Ubon Rajathani.<sup>2</sup> My father's name was yyy, and my mother's name was xxx. My own name was then Bua. When I was a young man, a wandering tudong monk,<sup>3</sup> Phra Acharn Tong, led his bhikkhu followers to my village, teaching the public as he came. In the evening, many of the villagers would regularly gather together and go to listen to the Dhamma teaching. I took the opportunity to join in and after a time my faith grew so strong that I became his disciple. Afterwards, I requested bhikkhu-ordination and joined with his group of monks which continued wandering through the jungle, visiting other villages. I travelled with him until the end of that life.

Phra Acharn Tong led us to spend the Rains Retreat<sup>4</sup> at Bahn Sam-Pong Village, Nakorn Panom, which was in the densest jungle and full of fever.<sup>5</sup> At that time, before my very eyes and within a few days of each other, two monks became ill and died from the jungle fever. Then I became ill and each day my condition worsened, until I realized I wasn't going to make it through. Finally, I knew that I must die that very day for it was as if every part of my body was on fire. Realizing this was truly going to be the end, I collected myself and fixed my mindfulness on the heart,<sup>6</sup> being concerned that I might be heedless at the time of death.

When the end came, everything was extinguished, but the heart that had been in the body now left it. It was as if another *Phra Bua* had arisen from the Phra Bua who lay dead on his sleeping mat. (I) stood and watched the dead Phra Bua and the monks and people who had come to visit the dead monk. My robes were on properly, with my alms bowl over one shoulder and my *krot*<sup>7</sup> over the other. It was as if I was about to go out wandering on *tudong* to develop meditation, but at that time I still didn't feel like going anywhere. I just stood and watched the monks and villagers arrange the cremation and burn my own corpse. No one there realized or knew that Phra Bua had left his body and was in fact standing there looking on. I made no attempt to attract attention but just stood there waiting, watching my corpse until it was completely consumed and all that remained were ashes and charcoal. It was from this point that I began to realize that I had really died.

After my body was burnt, I thought it best to leave—what possible advantage could there be in remaining there? So I then set out along the path and nobody perceived that a new Phra Bua had gone wandering *tudong*. It was just the same as when the old Phra Bua had gone, for wherever I went people would greet me and come out to receive me. They would offer food (in my alms bowl) as I continued on, always to the East. I still carried my bowl and *krot* and just wandered on and on without any particular destination in mind.

I then came to a place where there was a very big pavilion or hall,<sup>8</sup> the like of which I had never seen in our human world. It was full of many men and women, and though they all seemed to be dressed differently they were all the same in the fullness of their suffering. Everyone looked very sad and depressed, without a sign of a smile on any face. In the midst of this hall was one large table with many office chairs—they weren't like our human tables and chairs. On the table were two piles of books; one pile being very big and the other very small. About thirty officials were in attendance there, all dressed differently, none the same. Each officer had flashing, fearsome eyes that made the people avoid their

---

\*Translated from the Thai by A. Bhikkhu. The piece is semi-anonymous, although the translator knows the person behind these initials and has complete trust that it is genuine. The translation is quite literal, except for some repetitions that have been edited and such places are shown by ellipses ... Similar descriptions are found throughout the world, though with different cultural symbols.

gaze whenever it was directed in their direction. Nobody seemed able to meet and hold such a stern gaze and everyone was very afraid. I was the only monk present who had come without coercion and so I wasn't as much afraid of the officers as everyone else seemed to be.

Everyone was standing, nobody sat down, and that included myself as I listened to the people's names been called. They were called in batches and sent out in groups. In one group there were about a hundred people, sometimes more, sometimes less, with only one officer in charge. A person once called always seemed terrified of the officer in charge, who each carried a strange, dangerous looking weapon in their hand.

After most of the people in the hall had been called and sent off, only two or three officers remained. While of those who had been called by name, only one old lady of about sixty years remained, and two men and one woman who hadn't yet arrived. When all the work of sending people off was finished, the remaining officer called out the name of the old lady and invited her to go down to the lake in front of the hall. He spoke very politely and gently: "Please Madame, go down to the lake, first of all removing all your clothes, then walk through the lake and out onto the further bank. Then a heavenly vehicle<sup>9</sup> will come down to receive you with a complete set of clothing and finery for you to change into."

The lady then descended from the hall in a very graceful manner, just as if she was an upasika<sup>10</sup> coming down from a monastery's hall. The officer, meanwhile, followed her down to offer any necessary assistance, just as if he was an upasaka<sup>11</sup> waiting to help any visitors to the monastery. When the lady reached the lake, she removed all her clothes and walked through the water which was only about a metre deep. A heavenly vehicle appeared and flew down from the sky and the lady was invited to come across to it. A set of clothing and jewellery (etc.,) was put out and when the lady arrived the two drivers humbly and carefully helped dress her so that she became as beautiful as a heavenly maiden. This heavenly lake was full of heavenly water, with heavenly flowers full of perfume and colours of various hues. It was all so beautiful and arrested the eyes and heart so much that one could never tire of praising it. When everything was ready, the vehicle flew up into the sky like some fluffy ball of cotton wool lofted by a gust of wind. It flew by the power of her 'past good deeds'<sup>12</sup> with no sound or need for any type of earthly motor. I stood there watching until it disappeared from sight.

After the heavenly vehicle had taken the lady up to the heaven<sup>13</sup> realm, I recalled all that I had seen and wondered why they had called out the names and sent off the people in groups with such menacing gestures, while with this lady they were so gentle and refined as if in great admiration of her. So I asked them about the announcing of the names and the dispatching in groups, and about the purpose of the two piles of books on the table. They answered: "We call the names so that we know who has already arrived and who has yet to come. They are sent off in groups ... because of the different destinations according to the various degrees of 'evil' they have done. Some have killed their parent(s) ... some have killed water buffalo or cattle, which are animals giving much help to humans, some have killed other animals without any compassion, ... some have robbed and stolen from or cheated their fellow human beings, ... some are adulterers or seducers, ... Kamma of each type must be treated with the appropriate fruit of that kamma. While with the two piles of books, the big pile is for the names of those who have done evil, while the small pile is for those who have done good."

I then asked about those who had been called but who had not appeared. What would happen about them? They answered that though they hadn't yet arrived it wouldn't be long before they came. Whether good or evil, once their name is called they cannot not come. "And what about the lady and the vehicle that took her away. Where was she going?", I asked. They replied, "she went to heaven because this good lady has much merit and throughout her life has been generous and done much good, and never caused trouble for anyone. Because of this, her 'merit'<sup>14</sup> has helped her to go to the deva, happy realm."

"Well, what about me then?" I asked. "I never heard my name called at all. Where am I supposed to go?" They replied, "Your name isn't in the accounts yet, they haven't yet sent it. If you wish to go to heaven, please go down to the lake where the lady went, and a heavenly vehicle will soon come to receive you just as it did with her. If you want to be born as a human, please return the way you came and you will be reborn as a human being ...." I then replied, "I'm not going to heaven nor to the human

realm because I'm so thirsty. First of all I must go and find some water to drink ... then I'll go on afterwards." They answered, "Whatever is convenient for you".

I then said good bye and came down from the hall and took the old way back, with my bowl and *krot* over their respective shoulders. I walked on and on, with the intention of trying to find a drink of water. Then I came to the village where I was born (in this life), *Bahn Nam Kum*. I met a woman who was going out to fetch water from a well in the surrounding fields, so I requested some drinking water from her. The woman said to me, "Please venerable sir, go and wait a little in that house over there and I will presently fetch water to offer to you". After hearing this, I walked straight over to the house, that I could clearly see and which wasn't so far from the well. After going up into the house and sitting down in front, I felt very tired and sleepy so I decided to lean back and lie down for a short rest, until the woman should bring the water from the well. After refreshing myself, I would then continue on my way. On lying down to rest I fell asleep for just a few moments, and on waking up—where was I? I had already been born again!

At the very moment of birth, I realized I had been reborn but I wasn't able to act out my feelings because the body was still so weak and was painful and ached all over ... At the moment of my delivery as a new born baby, I still had old memories of being a bhikkhu that did not fade or grow dim. Even though I was a baby, it still felt as if I was wearing robes and carrying my bowl and *krot*. I was still able to remember everything from before; as far as the village where I had been born before, my mother and father, and relatives. I could recollect it all but couldn't say a word.

When I did start to talk, I used the special vocabulary of a bhikkhu, using the personal pronoun of '*Atamah*'<sup>15</sup> (or 'I') because I felt I was still a bhikkhu. This didn't seem to change at all, following the body of a child ... My first spoken word was '*Atamah*,' which followed from my previous practice and I endeavoured to pronounce it properly and articulately. When others heard me use the word *Atamah*, as if a bhikkhu was talking with lay followers, my parents and relatives would come and forbid my speaking in such a way. They said that I was (just) a baby and not a bhikkhu, and that I mustn't say *Atamah* for the world would not approve of such startling expressions. But the child kept on speaking so ... My parents then scolded me and said that for an infant—"look at yourself!"—to use a bhikkhu's special vocabulary was a sin ... At this I became frightened and sorry, and the feeling that had accompanied me, of being a bhikkhu, faded and fell away, leaving only the body of a child. From then on, I stopped myself from talking as before.

After I was bigger, I longed to see the parents and relatives of my previous life ... and complained to my (new) parents that I wanted to visit my old home ... My parents then scolded me again, saying that I was only causing trouble for myself ... I then decided I must explain to them the truth about what had happened to me, so I told them about my previous life, my old home, becoming a bhikkhu and my death, and that I really wanted to go and visit my old house.

On hearing and knowing their son's story to be true, my parents both burst into tears and felt guilty about having continually berated me before. They asked for my forgiveness ... and my mother explained that her intention had always been to look after her son, whom she loved very much ... She said that although she wouldn't forbid my visiting my old home, I should wait until I was older. And that I should consider that she was (now) my true mother, who would sacrifice even her own life for mine ... After hearing all of this, I felt very sorry for my mother and realized that I would have to put my desire to visit my old home aside because it would upset her too much."

(After hearing all this related by Novice Lee-am,) the writer asked if he had ever visited his old village in this life... and the novice replied that he had not, nor had he met Phra Acharn Tong, but that he would certainly remember him if he met him again... The writer then took the novice around to all the different meditation teachers (gathered together for the cremation of Phra Acharn Man), asking him which of them might be Phra Acharn Tong, testing him carefully... and he did recognize the true Phra Acharn Tong, and was without any doubts, even though the writer pretended not to know... At that time, it wasn't possible for Phra Acharn Tong and the Novice Lee-am to meet because we were all so busy with other things, and the writer regrets losing such a perfect opportunity to corroborate the

story....

Later the same year, the writer happened to meet Phra Acharn Tong and asked him whether he had ever stayed at Bahn Sam-Pong Village (where Phra Bua said he had died). He replied that he had and that there was so much fever there that three bhikkhus had died, the last being a Phra Bua... Then the writer explained all about Novice Lee-am... Phra Acharn Tong remembered Phra Bua and said that he had been ordained three years when he died and his meditation had been good. Phra Acharn Tong felt it was a great loss when Phra Bua had died so young because he might have helped so many people... Phra Acharn Tong said that he had never met Novice Lee-am and he wondered if his bodily characteristics were as before. The writer then asked how long ago had Phra Bua died? Phra Acharn Tong replied that it would be sixteen years ago. The Novice Lee-am had that very year told me that he was fifteen years old.

Ñ.B.

---

### End Notes

1. The cremation of Phra Acharn Man Bhuridatta Mah<sup>1</sup>thera in Northeast Thailand, in February 1950, saw a great gathering of forest monks come to offer their final respects. They camped amongst the trees of the forest, meditating, listening to Dhamma-talks, discussing Dhamma and preparing the cremation site.

2. Northeast Thailand.

3. *Phra Kammatṭhāna*.

4. For the 3 months of the Monsoon Season.

5. Malaria, for example.

6. *citta*.

7. An 'umbrella', from which hangs a mosquito net, used as a shelter by *tudong* monks in the jungle.

8. *sala*.

9. *vimāna*.

10. *Buddhist female lay devotee*.

11. *Buddhist male lay devotee*.

12. lit: *puñña* or 'merit'.

13. *deva*.

14. *puñña*.

15. which is reserved only for monks.